

# The Language of Irony (Towards a Definition of the Poetry of Cavafy)

NASOS VAYENAS

The first time André Gide heard the name of Cavafy was during his visit to Greece, in April 1939. He was talking to Dimaras, Theotokas and Seferis when the conversation turned to the poet of Alexandria. Gide asked what kind of poetry Cavafy wrote. 'Lyrique', Dimaras replied. 'Didactique', corrected Seferis. Later on Dimaras read 'The City' to the group. After the end of the reading Gide turned to Seferis and said: 'Je comprends maintenant ce que vous vouliez dire par le mot didactique...'.<sup>1</sup>

Seferis was to change his definition very soon. There is no doubt that Dimaras chose 'The City' as the most representative of Cavafy's poems. This choice and these divergent definitions, by the man who was to become the most important historian of modern Greek literature and by the most important contemporary Greek poet, are characteristic of the confusion of criticism in its dealings with the poetry of Cavafy. Cavafy's unprecedented poetic language posed a complicated problem which could not be solved with the current criteria. How could a man write poetry when his expressive means were those of prose? How could poetry transmit emotion when its language was not emotive, that is, not poetic? The problem proved a fruitful one, for it forced some critics to go beyond psychological, philosophical or sociological interpretations to a

1. George Seferis, *Mémoires*, I<sup>er</sup> (Athens, 1977), p. 116.

closer reading of Cavafy's poetry. The most important results of this closer approach to Cavafy were contributed by, as far as I know, Agras, Nikolareizis, Dallas and Seferis.

For Agras, poetry is of two kinds: 'lyric', and 'dramatic'. Lyric poetry works through what he calls 'Poetic or Lyrical Imagination' – that is by images and music – and is the poetry of form. Didactic poetry, on the other hand, to which the poetry of Cavafy belongs, is the poetry of content and functions through the 'Rhetoric of Dramatic Imagination' (one of the elements of which is tragic irony); that is to say that functions through rhetorical figures of speech (repetitions, digressions, etc.) and – more important – through the use of historical and psychological characters who express the poet's internal tragedy in dramatic form.<sup>2</sup>

Nikolareizis approaches the problem through a discussion of form. Cavafy, he says, is trying to express reality in its natural objectivity. For this reason the personal intervention in his poems is limited to the minimum. Cavafy's language works by means of this absence which protects his expression from descriptive sensualism. Therefore his lyricism is indirect: instead of describing emotion provoked by an event, he describes only the event. This is why, most of the time, the poet's presence within the poem is eliminated, giving the impression that the impact of the poem is made in a void.<sup>3</sup>

These two explanations combine in the interpretation by Dallas. Like Nikolareizis, Dallas observes that Cavafy is trying to achieve an objective representation of the world by protecting his expression from the emotional diffusion which his personal intervention would cause. This creates a distance from things, which transforms his poetry into an *ἐποπτεία τῆς φαντασίας*. What Dallas means by this term is not clear. He only says that the *ἐποπτεία τῆς φαντασίας* consists of three expressive monads: the dramatic or lyrical imagination, the rhetoric or spiritual imagination, and the ironic imagination.<sup>4</sup>

Agras's and Nikolareizis's viewpoints combine again in Seferis, who examines the problem from the aspects of both form and content. Seferis returns insistently to the problem

2. Tellos Agras, *Γραμματολογικά καὶ ἄλλα, Νέα Ἑστία*, XIV (1933), 759–63.

3. D. Nikolareizis, *Δοκίμια κριτικῆς* (Athens, 1962), pp. 173–8.

4. Yannis Dallas, *Καβάφης καὶ ἱστορία* (Athens, 1974), pp. 129–30.

because the poetry of Cavafy seems to threaten the coherence of his own theory of poetry, especially his theory of emotional language. According to this, poetry is the language of emotion and, in order for language to attain its supreme form – that is, in order for it to become poetic – it must become a *sensuous language*. It must be able to make the verses ‘give a sense of touch, without necessarily bringing in eros’.<sup>5</sup> For this to come about, the language and sensibility of the poet must be an indivisible whole, so coordinated that one cannot perceive them separately. Moreover, that language is sensuous which ‘gives the expression of a dancing body, a musical expression’.<sup>6</sup>

Until 1941, Seferis was categorical about Cavafy. Cavafy was ‘a painter of cool and indifferent Parnassian portraits’.<sup>7</sup> Not only was his language not sensuous, his themes were remote in history and therefore presumably had no contemporary reference. Nevertheless, the sudden reversal of this opinion shows that Cavafy’s poetry must have had a subconscious fascination for Seferis. His unforeseen decoding of one of Cavafy’s epigrams – the discovery that the poem ‘Those Who Fought for the Achaean League’ does not refer to past history but expresses a feeling related to the time just before the Asia Minor Disaster – revealed to Seferis a new Cavafy, a contemporary poet who ‘discovered the most concise and intense way of expressing his feelings’.<sup>8</sup> It was this discovery, for the most part, and the realization that Cavafy’s language is more emotional than it appears on the surface, that compelled Seferis to analyse the nature of this poetry. Until the time when he began to take a deeper interest in Cavafy’s poetry, it was only in Kalvos that he found instances of non-sensuous verse which sometimes reached the level of poetry: ‘Most of the time’, he says, ‘Kalvos’s words are like phantoms. They disperse like leaves. They draw without perspective. They have no shadow. No nap . . . The feeling is behind the words’.<sup>9</sup> How in these instances Kalvos managed to write poetry remained for Seferis a mystery which he did not consider himself in a position to

5. George Seferis, *Δοκίμεις*, 3rd ed., I (Athens, 1974), p. 403.

6. *Ibid.*

7. *Ibid.*, p. 330.

8. *Ibid.*

9. *Ibid.*, p. 62.

explain for years – not until his ‘Prologue to an Edition of the *Odes*’ (1942). His conclusion is that in these moments Kalvos, for all his dry pedantry, is redeemed by ‘the pressure of his great breath’.<sup>10</sup>

Seferis’s decision to return to the study of the problem of Kalvos’s poetry was undoubtedly encouraged by his observance of the same phenomenon in Cavafy. ‘Cavafy’s language’, he writes, ‘is either abstract or languidly sentimental or, in its final stage of development, prosaic, without nap. . . . Sensualism, Cavafy’s sense of touch, cannot be expressed in his verse. . . . In his good period . . . it is *behind* the expression of his language. . . . The bodies in Cavafy walk, run, wait, or stand motionless or dead. They never dance.’<sup>11</sup> Nevertheless, his poetry communicates emotion. It is this contradiction that constitutes the problem of Cavafy’s poetry. How does Cavafy succeed in making poetry with the tools of prose, without a sensuous language?

This contradiction is less intense in the *Odes*. One might make the comment that Seferis ought not to have called it a contradiction, because the phenomenon, in his view, is present in Kalvos only in certain of his weaker moments. In most of these moments, the verses are weak precisely because of the discontinuity between sensibility and poetic word. For Seferis, Kalvos’s best verses are those where there is no such discontinuity – that is, where his language is sensuous. In Cavafy, however, the problem appears in a different guise. The discontinuity between sensibility and poetic word is apparent in his mature period. Like Kalvos, Cavafy belongs to the learned tradition. In the context of this tradition and his own temperament, he could not produce lyricism. But, writes Seferis, poetry ‘could exist in other ways; in the expression of human action, for instance’.<sup>12</sup>

That ‘for instance’ clearly implies that poetry can exist in other forms than the lyric and the dramatic. What these forms are, Seferis does not say. Most probably, he is referring to the classical division of poetry into epic, lyric and dramatic categories. The affirmation that contemporary poetry which is

10. Ibid., p. 209.

11. Ibid., pp. 403–4.

12. Ibid., p. 347.

not lyric can be dramatic is not a new element in his theory. Ten years previously, in the introduction to his translation of *The Waste Land*, he had written: 'Eliot's poetry is not lyric, like that of Mallarmé or Valéry. . . . It is a poetry essentially dramatic.'<sup>13</sup> What is new in his essays on Cavafy is that he no longer takes it for granted that poetry (lyric or dramatic) cannot exist unless the language is sensuous. In such instances, what leads the poets in the right direction is the innate word. But in Cavafy, no such thing occurs, so in order to overcome his weakness, Cavafy is obliged to resort to other means, 'to grasp at an external object.'<sup>14</sup>

By 'external object' Seferis means Cavafy's use, at an unexpectedly early date, of an 'objective correlative', his main argument for the parallel with Eliot. This mode of expression is imposed upon the poet by his need to objectify his emotion. Eliot stated in his famous dictum that the only way in which one can express emotion artistically is to use a kind of intermediary: 'a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that *particular* emotion; such that when the external facts, which must terminate in sensory experience, are given, the emotion is immediately evoked'.<sup>15</sup> This definition refers mainly to the kind of poetry Eliot wrote, and it would be wrong to extend it to include every kind of poetry, as has been the tendency since its formulation. For, if we were to try to justify it for lyric poetry, we would frequently be compelled to reformulate it. Nevertheless, there is no doubt that it could be used to describe the dramatization of emotion which we find in the 'historical' poems of Cavafy. Those are, for Seferis, his most successful poems, because, through a dramatic enactment of emotion, they achieve a more concise expression and a clearer perspective of events. By contrast, those poems in which Cavafy aspires to a more immediate communication of his feelings are characterized by an annoying languidness of expression. It is with the dramatic enactment of emotion that Cavafy succeeds in transforming his prosaic tools into those of poetry. Thought and elements of analytical expression, which are legion in his best poems, are employed not so much for what they signify but

13. *Ibid.*, p. 38.

14. *Ibid.*, p. 376.

15. T. S. Eliot, *Selected Essays* (London, 1972), p. 145.

rather for creating interactions between men and events such as will produce emotion. Herein lies the difference between Cavafy and Kalvos. Kalvos, Seferis says, 'explains and speaks where he must act';<sup>16</sup> Cavafy acts where he appears to be speaking. His expression does not function in the manner of sensuous language but uses the gestures and mannerisms of the characters he describes. 'Very often in Cavafy', writes Seferis, 'whereas the language is neutral and unmoved, the movement of the characters and events is so dense, so water-tight, I would say, that one has the feeling of one's emotion being dragged out *by means of a vacuum*. It is this vacuum that makes the difference between Cavafy's sentences and current prose.' 'Sometimes', Seferis continues, 'Cavafy's poems show an emotion similar to that created by a statue which is not on its pedestal. Which was there – we saw it – but now has been removed. Nevertheless, the poems *show* the emotion.'<sup>17</sup>

In reaching this conclusion, Seferis appears to have dealt with one part of the problem, Cavafy's language. He deals with the other part – Cavafy's sensibility – using a description taken again from Eliot (from his essay on the Metaphysical Poets). Cavafy's poetry is also held to communicate emotion because his sensibility functions in a manner similar to John Donne's or George Herbert's: with 'a direct sensuous apprehension of thought, a recreation of thought into feeling'. Seferis explains how he understands Eliot's words: Cavafy 'is thinking in his feeling';<sup>18</sup> 'he feels in his thought'.<sup>19</sup> His language therefore communicates emotion because his sensibility is 'an indissoluble mixture of thought and feeling';<sup>20</sup> thus, 'his thought is also expressed by his sensibility'.<sup>21</sup>

Seferis feels that these explanations solve the problem of Cavafy's poetry. But in fact this solution merely bypasses the whole subject, because the above explanations are fundamentally no different from those he employs to describe the manner in which sensuous language creates emotion. The

16. Δοκιμές, I, p. 197.

17. Ibid., pp. 348–9.

18. Ibid., p. 344.

19. Ibid., p. 377.

20. Ibid., p. 431.

21. Ibid., p. 442.

problem is not whether or not Cavafy's thinking is expressed by his sensibility. If it were not, we should have no reason to discuss his verse at all. His poems would be versified thoughts or descriptions, and not true poems. It is how his sensibility manages to express itself completely by means of one aspect which would normally convey only a part of it – the intellectual aspect. To put it another way, how does feeling come to be communicated in a language without 'sensualism'? It is not sufficient to assert that Cavafy's poetry communicates emotion because it is dramatic. That a dramatic manner is not the main element in the creation of emotion in this kind of dramatic poetry (the non-theatrical), and is not on its own enough to produce the emotion required for the language to become poetic, is amply demonstrated by the example of the Greek romantics and certain of Cavafy's own unpublished poems. Moreover, all the examples of dramatic poetry to which Seferis refers are examples of a poetry which communicates emotion not so much through the capacity of its dramatic element but through its linguistic sensualism. Eliot's poetry is dramatic, but the dramatic is only one of the 'three characteristic elements of his technique'.<sup>22</sup> For the most part, what makes it poetry is the sensualism of his language, and Eliot's great gift of an 'auditory imagination'. Dante's poetry is also dramatic, but the vision it presents is, as Seferis himself says, 'so much fed by visual, acoustic, or other bodily senses' that it even transforms his abstract thought into tangible objects.<sup>23</sup> Homer's poetry is dramatic, but the sense of touch in his language is even greater than in Dante's.<sup>24</sup> There is an essential difference between Cavafy's dramatic language and the dramatic language of the above poets, the same difference which distinguishes his poetry from prose: the vacuum created by his expression.

There is another reason why the comparison of the functioning of Cavafy's poetry with that of the metaphysical poets is a simplification of the problem. Seferis translates the passage from Eliot incorrectly, and in doing so he confuses two processes which do not function in the same way for Eliot. The syntactical arrangement of the clauses in his translation, *μὴ*

22. *Ibid.*, p. 38.

23. *Ibid.*, II, pp. 261–2.

24. *Ibid.*, I, p. 347.

ἄμεση αἰσθησιακὴ σύλληψη τῆς σκέψης, μιὰ ἀνάπλαση τῆς σκέψης σὲ αἴσθημα<sup>25</sup> ('a direct sensuous apprehension of thought, a recreation of thought into feeling') implies that the latter is an elucidation of the former, that these two phrases mean the same thing. But 'recreation of thought into feeling' (Cavafy 'feels in his thought') is something distinct from the 'sensuous apprehension of thought' (Cavafy 'is thinking in his feeling'). While in the latter case thought and feeling function simultaneously as a direct emotional experience (which, it goes without saying, can only be expressed in sensual language), in the first instance, emotion is created indirectly; thought comes first and is then recreated into feeling (and this, too, cannot exist as poetry, whether lyric or dramatic, if the language fails to achieve an adequate degree of sensualism). In the original the distinction is clear. In the metaphysical poets, writes Eliot, 'there is a direct sensuous apprehension of thought, *or* a recreation of thought into feeling'.<sup>26</sup> Cavafy functions in the latter manner, but this is not enough to justify a comparison with the metaphysical poets, because there are no further similarities. One could even say that there are no similarities at all, because even the recreation of thought into feeling in Cavafy does not come about in the same manner. In contradistinction to Cavafy's language, the language of the metaphysical poets is in this case sensual. These poets, Eliot continues, 'feel their thought as immediately as the odour of a rose',<sup>27</sup> because 'their intellect is immediately at the tips of the senses. Sensation became word and the word sensation'.<sup>28</sup> In Cavafy nothing of the sort takes place, something which, as we have seen, Seferis himself stresses: 'Sensualism, Cavafy's sense of touch, cannot be recreated in his verse. . . . In his good period . . . it is *behind* the expression of his language.'

Thus the source of emotion in Cavafy's poetry must lie somewhere else. In my opinion, we would not be wrong in looking for it in Cavafy's use of irony.

It is through irony that Cavafy's poetry communicates emotion. When Seferis observes that Cavafy's poems drag out

25. Ibid., p. 342.

26. *Selected Essays*, p. 286. The italics are mine.

27. Ibid., p. 287.

28. *The Sacred Wood* (London, 1972), p. 129.



emotion by means of a vacuum he is looking in the right direction for the source of that emotion although he does not manage to place it exactly. This void is the result of the manner in which irony functions. If one considers that the fundamental feature of irony is a contradiction between what is apparent and what is real, and if one also takes into consideration that the largest and most mature part of Cavafy's work is constructed upon such contradictions, then the problem of his poetry is not beyond solution. Irony drags out emotion by means of a vacuum because it functions through an apparent absence – that is, through the action of thoughts and feelings which are suggested or left incomplete. Certainly irony is a method of intellectual perception, but it is nevertheless accompanied by its own characteristic feelings and emotions. To a greater or lesser extent, it is present in all great writers; it has been said that all literature is ironic.<sup>29</sup> But in the case of Cavafy, it functions in such a manner that we might say that his poetry is written in an ironic language.

I mean by the terms 'irony' and 'ironic language' the kind of expression which is created by Cavafy's integration of verbal and situational irony. With his verbal irony, Cavafy suggests meanings and feelings which do not exist in the words he uses, and which are different from, or even contradictory to, the meanings they express. With his situational irony, he creates contradictory states which, by suggesting or revealing the true nature of things, demonstrate that his heroes' concepts of reality are tragic illusions. Even the presence of imaginary or historical characters in his poems, serving to evoke primarily contemporary feelings, amounts to a kind of irony, at once verbal and situational. Seferis must have had in mind the result of situational irony when he spoke of the dramatic element as the source of emotion in Cavafy's expression. The relationship between this kind of irony and drama is of prime importance: the conflict between contradictory conditions, sudden changes of fortune, and hopes unexpectedly dashed, is the stuff of dramatic representation. The more intense the human action in

29. Cleanth Brooks believes that all poetry is ironic for the simple reason that every element in a poem undergoes a modification of meaning as a result of the pressure of its context. See his 'Irony as a Principle of Structure', in Morton Zabel, ed., *Literary Opinion in America* (New York, 1951), pp. 729–41.

Cavafy's poems, the more ironic the atmosphere becomes. But what makes Cavafy's irony different from that of other poets is not so much the frequency of his use of situational irony as it is the singular manner in which he combines his verbal and situational irony. The integration of these two elements is so well achieved and the meanings suggested so multifarious, that Cavafy's language functions as a kind of suction device which draws on the reader's emotion with a power comparable to that created by sensual language.

The principal source of irony is the distance created within sensibility between thought and feeling. This is the main reason why the parallel between Cavafy and the metaphysical poets is an unhappy one; the sensibility of the metaphysical poets is a mixture so indissoluble that Eliot invents a new term to characterize all subsequent English poetic sensibility, the term 'dissociation of sensibility'.<sup>30</sup> The writer who is aware of such distance often tries to overcome it by bridging the gap with irony. Naturally, the seriousness of this rift is reflected in expression (the example of Cavafy's expression is most apposite). The greater the dissociation of sensibility in a creative artist, the more ironic is his view of the world, and the more ironic his language becomes. Cavafy is, so far as I know, the only example of a contemporary poet whose emotion has irony as its chief source. (An analogous example exists in contemporary prose: Borges. I believe that the similarities between these two writers might be explained, to some extent, by their common esteem for the irony of Gibbon.) Where Cavafy's dissociation comes from need not concern us now. It is sufficient to mention that his irony is a reflection of his way of life; its characteristics, especially irony directed against himself, reveal its romantic origins.

In my opinion, the only way language in poetry can communicate emotion when it does not have an adequate degree of sensuality is through an adequate degree of irony. A notable feature of those of his poems where irony is less to the fore or not present at all is Cavafy's reinforcing of the sensualism of his language with more lyrical words or rhythmic repetition. This directs us to a further train of thought: (1) irony could, in small doses, reinforce the effectiveness of lyrical language; (2)

30. *Selected Essays*, p. 288.

linguistic sensualism, in small doses, could reinforce the effectiveness of ironic language; (3) dramatic poetry (Eliot's for instance) is, in general terms, only a synthesis of equal quantities of lyric and dramatic elements; and (4) verbal irony is the only element in dramatic poetry which can replace the missing linguistic sensualism. But since, in this instance, we have the reinforcement of the dramatic element of dramatic poetry, and, consequently, the reinforcement of its situational irony, thus making this poetry different from that of the dramatic poets I have already mentioned, perhaps it would be better, methodologically, to distinguish this poetry by another name. For this reason, I suggest we could use the expression 'ironic poetry'.

Ironic poetry leads to a kind of poetic catharsis through a process similar to the process found in lyric and dramatic poetry. The last two offer the reader catharsis through the creation within himself of balanced psychological states, which is possible because of the word's emotional load. Ironic poetry leads to the same result through the accumulation of emotions produced by the contradictions created in the simultaneous appeal of verbal and dramatic irony. The means are dissimilar, but the end result is the same. In ironic language, the words function mainly through their intellectual force, and particularly through the force of their suggested appeal. But the fact that they manage to offer a catharsis, that is, an experience that is not only intellectual but also emotional, should not be seen as a paradox. Ironic language offers a catharsis because it expresses emotion condensed into an intellectual expression, but formulated in such a way (the most economical) that, on contact with the reader, it is violently dispersed and drags the reader's emotion along with the force of a maelstrom.

From this point of view, Cavafy is neither lyric nor dramatic: he is an ironic poet. Naturally, this distinction is not made with the intention of baptizing a new poetic genre. It is only intended to highlight the uniqueness of Cavafy's poetic nature, and to contribute to its more precise definition. Of course, the relationship between ironic and dramatic poetry is close. One might compare it with the relationship between metropolis and colony, or between a sovereign state and its satellite which has been conceded a certain degree of autonomy. Although the

citizens of the satellite subscribe to certain laws of their overlords, their behaviour is constrained more by the force of their own habits and customs. Cavafy is not a Roman; he is an Alexandrian. Thus, if ironic poetry was ever to try to win its complete independence, it could not hope to survive unless it observed one fundamental rule – to avoid long poems. Since irony functions through ellipsis and compression, its effectiveness is naturally diminished when the poem goes on at length. This seems to me the reason that Cavafy restricted himself to short poems, at a time when longwinded compositions were still considered essential for great poetry.

Seferis's inability to locate exactly the source of emotion in Cavafy's expression hinders him from perceiving the full range of Cavafy's irony, with the result that he makes serious misinterpretations. Seferis fails to catch the true tone of 'On the Outskirts of Antioch', and believes that the Christians' words about Babylas:

*Τὸ πήραμε, τὸ πήγαμε τὸ ἅγιο λείψανον ἄλλοῦ.  
Τὸ πήραμε, τὸ πήγαμε ἐν ἀγάπῃ κ' ἐν τιμῇ.<sup>31</sup>*

express an absolutely genuine emotion which reflects the poet's feelings. So he concludes that this poem is simply an attack against Julian and that Cavafy is on the side of Babylas and the Christians and against the ancients.<sup>32</sup> These lines certainly express an emotion; precisely what kind of emotion, however, is learned only from the fuller context. The subtle contradiction that is created between these verses and the other things the Christians of Antioch say, things that make clear to us the magnitude of their hatred for Julian, makes these lines serve to suggest in the most concise manner the magnitude of the Christians' hypocrisy. For their attitude towards Julian was dictated not by their Christian piety but by their strong distaste for Julian's ascetic version of the ancient worship, the application of which would result in a code of behaviour not unlike that prescribed by Christianity. Following this

31. 'We took it, the holy relic, and carried it elsewhere. / We took it, we carried it in love and in honour.' C. P. Cavafy, *Collected Poems*, tr. E. Keeley and P. Sherrard (London, 1975), p. 152.

32. Δοκίμιές, I, p. 454.

misinterpretation, Seferis further concludes that the poem 'A Great Procession of Priests and Laymen' is an unfavourable comment on Julian, while in fact Cavafy is poking fun at the Christians. Thus he misses the tone of the last line ('Υπὲρ τοῦ εὐσεβεστάτου Ἰοβιανοῦ εὐχηθῶμεν'),<sup>33</sup> which is one of the finest examples of Cavafy's ironic technique, and, in consequence, he loses the meaning of the whole poem. In Seferis's opinion, this line should be declaimed like a psalm, in the reverent tone appropriate to the prayers of the divine liturgy.<sup>34</sup> In fact, the line pokes fun at the Christians' hypocritical piety on seeing the cross after the announcement of Julian's death. Thus it should be read in an ironic tone of voice to call into question the genuineness of the emotion so skilfully created in the preceding lines.<sup>35</sup>

Nevertheless, it seems curious, when we take into consideration the satirical side of Seferis's temperament, that his failure to perceive all the sides of Cavafy's irony should be due to this one reason to which I have referred. A second reason would seem to be his insistence on looking for as many points of similarity as possible between Cavafy and Eliot, clearly a consequence of his excitement at the discovery of Cavafy's use of the 'objective correlative'. His misinterpretation of the above two poems is surely related to his attempts to find in Cavafy's poetry the theme of the resurrection of the dead god present in *The Waste Land*. Thus the image of the Christian youth dressed in white ('A Great Procession of Priests and Laymen') is to be projected onto the image of the dead Babylas,<sup>36</sup> and the two combined are to be correlated with the content of the poem 'Following the Recipe of Ancient Greco-Syrian Magicians', which, Seferis believes, allude to the resurrection of the dead god.<sup>37</sup> But this allusion is the result of a specific erotic nostalgia, and to identify it with Eliot's theme seems to me an inadmissible critical liberty; in the same way, his view that the principal

33. 'For most pious Jovian let us give our prayers'. *Collected Poems*, p. 101.

34. *Δοκιμές*, I, p. 454.

35. Cavafy's feelings about Christianity seem to have been so complicated that any unambiguous answer to the question of whether or not he was a Christian would be simplistic. For a survey of the problem, see G. P. Savvidis, *Κ. Π. Καβάφης, Περί ἐκκλησίας καὶ θεάτρου* (Athens, 1963), and 'Ἦταν χριστιανὸς ὁ Καβάφης'; in Savvidis, *Πάνω νερά* (Athens, 1973), pp. 115–20.

36. *Δοκιμές*, I, p. 456.

37. *Ibid.*, p. 360.

symbols in Cavafy's poetry are those of the dead god and the exhausted Proteus, is a simplification.<sup>38</sup> In fact, at the core of Cavafy's poetry we do find the symbol of Proteus, yet with the significance not of Eliot's Fisher King, but rather that of Myrtias ('Dangerous Thoughts'), who is a symbol of disharmony, of the fate of man searching for total fulfilment without ever managing to attain it, because life is nothing more than an ironic juxtaposition of opposites.

The nature of Cavafy's sense of language led him towards a verbal irony, the impact of which could not have been foreseen even by himself. His incomparable mixing of demotic with katharevousa – an ironic combination in itself – makes his verbal irony a powerful means of expression, thus increasing his situational irony. The power of the former nowadays has become intensified, for we have freed ourselves from certain exaggerations and prejudices with regard to demotic purity in poetry, a fact which is largely due to the impact of Cavafy's poetic language.

*King's College, Cambridge*

38. Ibid., p. 359.